

**RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP: THE KEY TO JOB SATISFACTION & RETENTION
OF JUNIOR AIRMEN IN THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE**

JCEC19 Submission

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	2
1.1	Background to Research Problem	2
1.2	Statement of the Challenge	2
1.3	Justification	2
1.4	Objectives	3
2	DIAGNOSIS	3
2.1	Contributors to Job Satisfaction	3
2.2	Leadership Related Causal Factors	3
2.2.1	Unethical Leadership	4
2.2.2	Autocratic Leadership Style.....	4
2.2.3	Consideration and Initiating Structure Leader Behaviour.....	4
2.2.4	Task-Related Attitudes and Behaviours.....	5
2.3	Root Cause	5
2.4	Conceptual Model	5
3	PROPOSED SOLUTIONS	6
3.1	360-Degree Feedback	6
3.2	Servant Leadership	7
4	RECOMMENDATION	8
4.1	Implementation	8
4.2	Organisational Benefit	9
5	CONCLUSION	9
	REFERENCES	10

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2 – Conceptual Model of Relational Leadership	6
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1 INTRODUCTION

I am a current serving member of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), with a current time in service of 24 years. During this time, I have achieved merit-based promotion through five layers of the non-commissioned ranks to my current rank of Flight Sergeant. My primary functional role is an Aircraft Technician; however, since promotion to Sergeant in 2004, I have rarely partaken in actual hands-on aircraft maintenance, instead fulfilling management and leadership roles for teams of up to 60 airmen.

I have no plan to separate from the service, nor have I ever seriously considered it as an option at any point during my career. The primary reason for this is that service life provides me with a great deal of satisfaction, both professionally and personally.

Nevertheless, airmen choose to separate from service. For airmen nearing the completion of their initial four-year minimum period of service (hereafter referred to as junior airmen), the reason that is most often given is *job dissatisfaction*. This is troubling both personally and organisationally—it conflicts with my personal positive experience of service life, and more importantly, the RAAF is losing the very people it needs to retain.

1.1 Background to Research Problem

In 2017, the RAAF implemented a 10-year strategy to transform to a 5th generation Air Force by 2027. RAAF senior leaders acknowledge recruitment and retention is a key enabler to the effective delivery of air power by Australia's future Air Force. As a result, *People Capability* is identified as one of the five strategic vectors required to achieve a successful transformation; Through recruitment of Australia's finest they will be able to "quickly and effectively adapt to rapid technological and operational change" (Air Force Strategy, 2017, p.20). Effective recruitment will entice the best people to apply through the promise of an exciting and adventurous career—job satisfaction is inferred. Generally, recruitment is a successful endeavour; applicants are subjected to a rigorous selection process and those with the desired personal attributes and academic achievement are recruited into service. How then is it possible that junior airmen experience job dissatisfaction after only their first few years of service?

1.2 Statement of the Challenge

After serving their initial minimum period of service, junior airmen are generally offered a permanent position. For junior airmen that are experiencing job dissatisfaction, it is likely that they will decline, instead choosing to separate. If the RAAF is unable to retain junior airman beyond their initial period of minimum service, then the People Capability vector is weakened, and the achievement of the 5th Generation Air Force transformational goal is at risk.

1.3 Justification

Research conducted by Thomas and Bell (2007) analysed Defence Exit Surveys over the previous five years to determine trends in the reasons for separation from the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Their research found consistency across all three branches of the ADF; job dissatisfaction was the most popular, or second most popular reason for personnel with less than 5 years of accumulated service.

More recently, Purnell (2016) reported that the Department of Defence is confronting the issue of retaining personnel, which opposes the ability of the military to face future challenges. Purnell (2016) also reported that recent Defence Exit Surveys declared job dissatisfaction as the second most popular reason for separation.

Several recent studies discuss the impact that leadership has on employee motivation (Jenson, 2018; Naile & Selesho, 2014; Rawung, 2013). All commonly conclude that ineffective leadership (as it relates to the personal needs of the employee) has a negative effect on employee motivation. As employee motivation correlates to the level of job satisfaction experienced by the employee (Singh & Tiwari, 2011), then ineffective leadership contributes to low motivation and by descent, job dissatisfaction.

The research and findings presented within this essay are consistent with my personal observations over the past decade, including most recently, whereby four young, bright and promising junior airmen at my previous unit initiated applications to separate upon completion of their initial minimum period of service, citing *job dissatisfaction because of ineffective leadership* as the reason.

1.4 Objectives

The objective of this essay is to diagnose and propose solutions to leadership related causal factors that promote job dissatisfaction felt by junior airmen, resulting in their separation from the RAAF. This is particularly important; just as recruitment of the best and brightest people is key to the successful transformation of the RAAF into a 5th Generation Air Force, their retention is also paramount.

2 DIAGNOSIS

2.1 Contributors to Job Satisfaction

The term *job satisfaction* implies the level of enjoyment, enthusiasm and happiness an employee has with their work (Kaliski, 2007). Global research has been conducted across a variety of commercial and public sectors into the contributors that influence job satisfaction. The findings from these studies identify both organisational and interpersonal contributors. Parvin & Kabir's (2011) study found organisational contributors to be working conditions, pay and promotion and job security, and interpersonal contributors to be fairness, relation with co-workers and relation with supervisor. Similarly, Anastasiou & Papakonstantinou (2014) found organisational contributors to be achievement, career advancement and interesting work, and interpersonal contributors to be responsibility, recognition and personal growth. As such, job satisfaction is directly related to how well the personal needs of the employee are being met by the leader (interpersonal contributors) and by the organisation within which they belong (organisational contributors).

Generally, organisational contributors are difficult to influence for positive change. Promotion, for example, usually occurs because a vacancy exists that is required to be filled, thus if a vacancy does not exist then promotion does not occur. Conversely, interpersonal contributors relate to relationships, that is, the behavioural interaction between leaders and followers. As such, the ability to positively influence is greatly improved; simply put, if behaviour within a leader-follower relationship is the cause of job dissatisfaction, then changing the behaviour within the relationship will improve satisfaction. It can therefore be stated that interpersonal contributors are quintessentially *leadership related causal factors* that contribute to job satisfaction.

2.2 Leadership Related Causal Factors

DuBrin (2016) categorises an effective leader as “one who helps group members attain job satisfaction” (para 4-6b). Logic serves that the reverse of this statement is also true, whereby ineffective leaders contribute to the attainment of group member job dissatisfaction. From my experience, the following leadership related causal factors influence job dissatisfaction felt by junior airmen.

2.2.1 Unethical Leadership

Junior airmen are rarely required to work alone, instead they form part of a team. Over time, relationships naturally form with the leaders that they interact with on a regular basis (normally one to three ranks higher). When this occurs, leaders provide information and opportunities not available to other junior airmen outside of the leader-follower relationship. This establishes exclusivity, whereby some junior airmen are more favoured than others. For those that are not favoured, opportunities are not forthcoming that would enhance their satisfaction. For example, they are overlooked for further professional development opportunities and operational deployments, due to a bias by superiors to select subordinates that they have formed a relationship with.

DuBrin (2016) relays fairness as one dimension that contributes to ethical leader behaviour. The application of favouritism through the leader's behaviour is unfair, and thus unethical. Consequently, unfavoured airman acquire a negative perception that the RAAF is structured to provide opportunity based on personal favouritism (unfair), instead of merit or worthiness (fair), which negatively effects their satisfaction.

If unethical leader behaviour is present, then follower dissatisfaction ensues.

2.2.2 Autocratic Leadership Style

The nature of the military profession is one where the organisational structure establishes positional power with the elevation of rank. Further, the requirement for task success is vital, creating a predisposition for leader behaviour to be of an authoritarian or autocratic style, in favour of democratic or laissez-faire styles (Lewin, Lippit & White, 1939; DuBrin, 2016). Autocratic leadership has merit in a task-oriented and rules-based environment where effectiveness and efficiency are crucial, however, the offset is that follower contribution is not considered. As a result, the achievement of follower satisfaction is "particularly problematic when skilled and capable members of a team are left feeling that their knowledge and contributions are undermined" (Cherry, 2018).

If followers gain satisfaction from making meaningful contributions, then dissatisfaction results when the opportunity to contribute is absent.

2.2.3 Consideration and Initiating Structure Leader Behaviour

Stogdill's (1974) Consideration and Initiating Structure leader behaviour model conveyed by DuBrin (2016) proposes varying leader behaviours that exist relative to the level of high/low consideration (member focused), and high/low structure (task focused) applied by a leader to group members. DuBrin (2016) further distinguishes that the study conducted by Judge, Piccolo & Ilies (2004) identified that job satisfaction and motivation of group members is strongly related to consideration, whereas performance of the job, group and organisation was strongly related to initiating structure. As previously discussed, the military is a task-oriented environment, therefore the research validates my personal experience of prevalent initiating structure leader behaviour within the RAAF. Consequently, a linkage exists between autocratic leadership and initiating structure leader behaviour because both relate to the achievement of tasks. Accordingly, consideration leader behaviour is less prevalent in the RAAF, resulting in low leader engagement with the relational needs of junior airmen.

If consideration of followers is low, then motivation and job satisfaction is also low.

2.2.4 Task-Related Attitudes and Behaviours

DuBrin (2016) associates the concept of task-related attitude and behaviour with focussing “more on the task to be performed than on the interpersonal aspect of leadership” (para. 4-2). It is my personal experience that these attitudes and behaviours generally correlate to the organisationally accepted definition of an effective leader. Accordingly, leaders who exhibit excellent task-related leader behaviour are considered to be effective leaders by positions of higher rank, due to the efficiency and effectiveness they display in completing tasks. However, as DuBrin (2016) notes, the interpersonal aspect of leadership is deficient. Consequently, follower dissatisfaction exists, and the perception of their leader’s effectiveness is diminished.

If task-related leader behaviour outweighs relational leader behaviour, then follower dissatisfaction stimulates belief that the leader is ineffective.

2.3 Root Cause

The root cause of junior airmen separating from the RAAF after serving their initial four-year minimum period of service is the result of job dissatisfaction induced by ineffective relational leader behaviour.

2.4 Conceptual Model

The following conceptual model describes relational leader behaviour that invokes a response in the follower:

Effective (ineffective) relational leadership increases (decreases) interpersonal engagement with followers. This is achieved via leader application of effective (ineffective) leadership style, ethical (unethical) behaviour, increased (decreased) relationship-oriented attitude and behaviour and increased (decreased) consideration behaviour. This results in a follower response of positive (negative) attitude and behaviour and increased (decreased) job satisfaction, corresponding in increased (decreased) commitment and loyalty to the organisation.

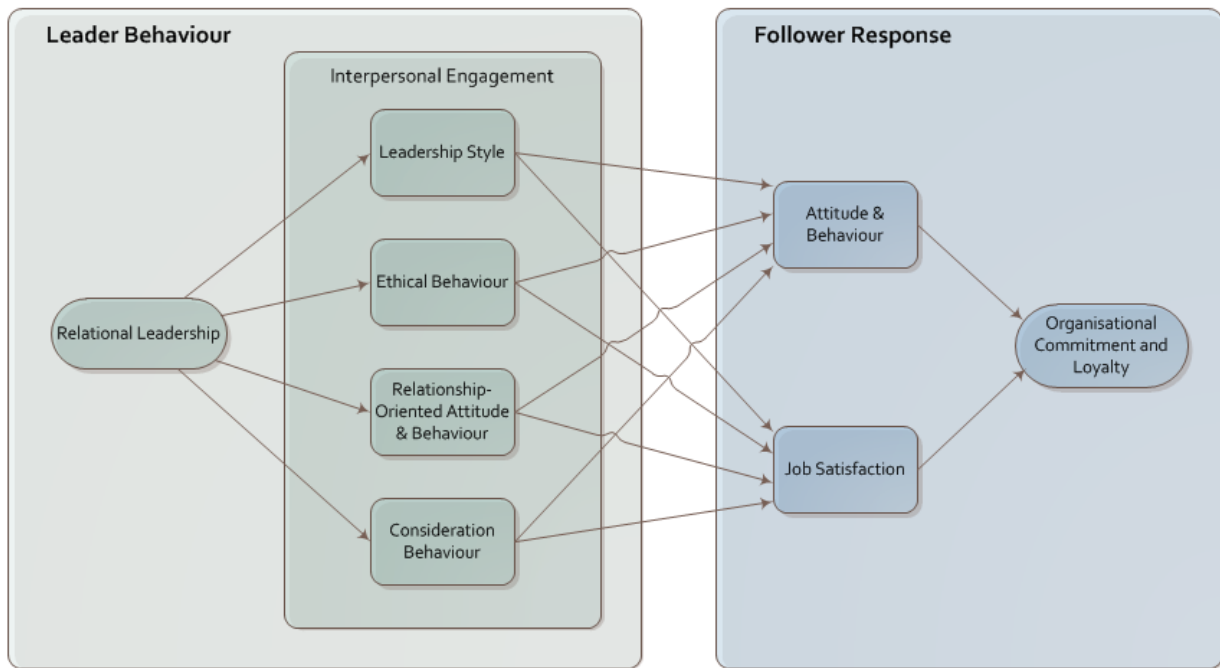


Figure 1 – Conceptual Model of Relational Leadership

3 PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The following solutions are proposed to address the practice of ineffective relational leadership.

3.1 360-Degree Feedback

The ability for a leader to make conscious change to their behaviour requires the leader’s own awareness and understanding of the problem. Awareness and understanding are achieved through receiving feedback, and the most credible source of feedback is delivered by those that are most affected by the behaviour—i.e. the follower. DuBrin (2016) defines 360-degree feedback as “a formal evaluation of superiors based on input from people who work for and with them” (para. 4-4). Its purpose is to allow superiors to understand their effectiveness as perceived by their subordinates, with the intent to improve performance based on the feedback provided.

From a leadership perspective, 360-degree feedback provides the ability for the leader-follower relationship to improve through leader embodiment of behavioural change to positively influence the follower’s perception of their performance. Whilst 360-degree feedback does not directly solve each of the leadership related causal factors, it does allow for the leader to become self-aware of their leadership effectiveness, which affords the leader opportunity to respond with positive change to their behaviour. Should the leader choose to modify their behaviour in response to feedback, then the relational leader behaviour towards the follower should improve, and a subsequent improvement to follower attitude, behaviour and job satisfaction would be achieved.

Incorporating a permutation of 360-degree feedback into a leader’s annual promotion performance assessment could be a useful mechanism to guide desirous relational leader behaviour. Leaders would be accountable for their relational leadership performance; the offset of poor performance, as judged by followers, would negatively affect their competitiveness for promotion to the next rank, and vice versa.

Notwithstanding the theoretical merit of 360-degree feedback, the superior-subordinate rank system within the military is not akin to subordinates critiquing their superior’s leadership performance. Feedback is provided top-down, that is, personnel of higher authority provide feedback to members below them in the chain of command. In my experience, the concept of bottom-up feedback within the RAAF is rare, the act of which could be classified as insubordination, contingent upon the situation. DuBrin (2016) also notes that 360-degree feedback is a complex activity that has limitations to its application. For example, willingness of the follower to participate or commit to truthful and value-adding responses without fear of retribution, willingness of the leader to listen without offence and commit to behavioural change, and abuse by the follower to affect a personal vendetta towards the leader.

Positive	Negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-awareness (leader) • Behavioural change (leader) • Relational behaviour (leader & follower) • Job satisfaction (follower) • Consequence for poor relational leadership performance (leader) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to implement to military environment • Unwillingness of participants (leader & follower) • Possibility of abuse (follower)

3.2 Servant Leadership

DuBrin (2016) relates the act of being a servant leader to be a key aspect to forming relationship-oriented leadership. A servant leader “serves constituents by working on their behalf to help them achieve their goals” (DuBrin, 2016, para. 4-3). This requires the servant leader to make a commitment to satisfying the needs of their followers—morally, emotionally and professionally. The nature of volunteering for military service is the act of commitment to something greater than self, so it should follow that military leaders should carry the concept of sacrifice beyond the organisational cause and commit to their followers.

DuBrin (2016) notes recent research on servant leadership found to positively influence follower organisational citizenship behaviour job performance and staying with the organisation. Improved organisational citizenship behaviour infers followers are motivated to achieve beyond the required standard and are thus satisfied (Liden, Wayne, Zhao & Henderson, 2008; Peterson, Galvin & Lange, 2012; Walumbwa, Hartnell & Oke, 2010). Improved job performance relates to competency, efficiency and effectiveness which enhances follower perception of their value to the organisation, which purports positive influence over job satisfaction. Because followers are satisfied, they demonstrate commitment and loyalty by choosing to stay with the organisation.

DuBrin (2016) identifies a servant leader to be fundamentally trustworthy that strives to do what is right for their followers at the expense of personal gain. Unquestionable reliability in doing what is right is a moral choice, therefore, “a servant leader is a moral leader” (DuBrin, 2016, para. 4-3). As such, the causal factor of unethical leadership is diminished through the practice of servant leadership.

It could however be argued that servant leadership does not belong in the military context; for the same reasons that autocratic, initiating structure and task-oriented behaviour is prevalent, servant leader behaviour is scarce. True servant leadership requires absolute commitment to understanding and responding to follower needs. Therefore, the practice of servant leadership may limit the leader’s capacity to successfully lead the achievement of organisational goals, which in a military context is an undesirable outcome.

The practice of servant leadership is also averse to the authority structure provisioned via the military rank system. For example, the servant leader is of higher rank and authority than the follower, however the relationship-oriented attitude and behaviour displayed by the servant leader suggests the opposite, this being that the leader serves the follower. Should a situation demand a different style of leadership, the leader may have difficulty in inciting the required follower response due to the blurred line of authority between the servant leader and follower. For example, a leader will adopt a commanding style in an emergency or dangerous situation to incite an immediate and unquestioned response by the follower, however the follower may not respond appropriately if confusion over authority exists. Further, the follower may adopt the viewpoint over time that the leader has no actual authority. Followers may perceive that they are the leader and the servant is the follower, the implications of which could be dire in the military environment.

Positive	Negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical behaviour (leader) • Organisational citizenship behaviour (follower) • Job performance (follower) • Job satisfaction (follower) • Organisational commitment & loyalty (follower) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced organisational focus (leader) • Potential loss of Authority (leader) • Reduced conformance (follower)

4 RECOMMENDATION

The literature suggests that the practice of servant leadership is the key to positively affecting the attitude, behaviour and job satisfaction of junior airmen. This correlates with my personal experience of following leaders with servant leader behavioural characteristics—I recall exceptionally high morale, passion and productivity within the team. Strong bonds of trust and respect also formed between the team members, and with each member and the leader. Overall, satisfaction, commitment and loyalty to the organisation was high. This supports my belief that being a servant leader is the essence of true relationship-oriented behaviour, which in this case is fundamentally significant in solving the problem.

4.1 Implementation

The Situational Leadership II model (Blanchard, Zigarmi & Nelson, 1993) is analysed and discussed in depth during the leadership component of Sergeant and Flight Sergeant professional military education, however the concept of servant leadership is not explored. This could be achieved via the implementation of a relationship-oriented behaviour module to the professional military education program, via analysis and discussion of servant leadership theory and scenario-based role-play activity. Graduates would attain understanding of the

theoretical value of servant leader behaviour and become familiar with its application. The expectation is that graduates will return to their place of duty and exhibit servant leader behaviour towards their subordinates.

4.2 Organisational Benefit

There are organisational benefits, additional to the interpersonal benefits previously discussed. On the premise that “servant leaders often ignite a cycle of service by acting as a role model for servant behaviour”, junior airmen would mirror servant leader behaviour in their interactions with other team members (DuBrin, 2016, para. 4-3). As junior airmen are promoted to higher ranks, an organisational culture of servant leader behaviour develops over time.

5 CONCLUSION

This essay explored the leadership related causal factors that contribute to the job dissatisfaction felt by RAAF junior airmen, resulting in deliberate choice to separate from service. This problem contributes to the broader organisational challenge of successfully transforming to a 5th Generation Air Force, key enablers being recruitment and retention of the best people.

Diagnosis found ineffective relational leadership to be the root cause, predominately due to a lack of interpersonal leader engagement with junior airmen. The conceptual model developed from the diagnosis describes the consequence of ineffective relational leadership; reduced levels of motivation and job dissatisfaction propels corresponding negative attitudes and behaviours, resulting in diminished commitment and loyalty to the organisation over time.

Solutions were presented to counter the challenge—360-degree feedback has merit, however there are limitations to the effective use of this process in the military environment. The practice of servant leader behaviour was recommended as an effective method to improve relational leadership between leaders and junior airmen.

The professional military education program could provide formal and organisationally supported education on servant leadership. As greater numbers of graduates are educated in the practice of servant leadership, servant leader behaviour will become culturally custom within the RAAF. If this occurs, then the job satisfaction, commitment and loyalty to the organisation of junior airmen is greatly enhanced, and their retention provides assurance for the achievement of a 5th Generation Air Force.

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